

Letting Go

Guardian1

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This story was first published on June 2nd, 2001, and was last updated on June 2nd, 2001.

FicLab ID: Lrlw8kcc/lq2e6nz4/50000E5U

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Summary

title Letting Go
author Guardian1
source <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/303630/>
published June 2nd, 2001
updated June 2nd, 2001
words 4,377
chapters 1
status Abandoned
rating Fiction T
tags Abandoned, Angst, Fanfiction, Final Fantasy IX, Games

Description:

Freya still has some problems with letting go. Set just pre-Zidane comeback after the game.

1. Letting Go

Letting Go

The first winter since Zidane had left, it had snowed and snowed; snowed until the land and the people ached with cold. Princess Garnet's head was bowed and it was a popular rumour throughout Alexandria that the only season that could bear to see her so miserable was winter, which was why it was so severe.

And severe it was. The death toll had been rising steadily as the land continued to freeze almost unnaturally. Many had contemplated moving to a place with a gentler clime for the extent of the bitter winter, until it was discovered that they would just be walking into a parched dustdry continent suffering just as much from summer as Alexandria and the surrounding lands on the continent suffered from winter. Nobody knew the cause; the only thing that was apparent was that Gaia was in pain.

Dr. Tot theorized that the loss of the planet Terra had had adverse affects on the entire universe in

general. However, this scientific theorem — although intelligent — wasn't a solution, and as General Beatrix put succinctly and sarcastically, "Well, that's a help."

They'd had to evacuate Burmecia and those working to rebuild it. The rain had turned into freezing sleet, and they'd already had one fatality where a worker had succumbed to hypothermia, working when a blizzard had started, and eventually died. Burmecia could not handle any more death as their population hung on a tenuous thread, and thus Iron-Tail Fratley herded them all away. It had been hard going. Gizamaluke's Grotto had been utterly iced shut and resembled the Ice Cave more than anything else: the bells did not ring and Master Gizamaluke slumbered far beneath the ice in the underground lake.

Freya Crescent, whose heart and soul lay with the spring, found it all incredibly depressing.

The ability to stay in one place for more than five minutes had been drowned out of her for the years and years of her self-induced exile, and thus her wandering took her away once more from the shanty-town settlement. Her heart had dreamed of home, but her home was buried beneath piles of

snow and ice. She was beginning to think that the old Burmecia, the memory instilled deep within her core, was truly dead and gone for her. The entire land seemed against her finding any true happiness.

Thus finally, the unflappable, unbreakable, seasoned warrior was *frustrated*.

Compared with the dirty snow and soot-covered walls of Lindblum, the pristine snowfields outside the city seemed almost *pretty*. However, as disgusting and as civilization-crammed as the city was, it was habitable, and Freya never had to go for the want of a fire stationed inside Lindblum Castle. She would have been far happier in an inn room within the city, but Eiko had insisted, and what Princess Eiko wanted Princess Eiko *got*.

Fratley had been rather surprised when she had taken up Eiko's offer of weathering out a little bit of the winter with her, but Freya had needed it as badly as her lungs needed breathing. Her lover was oppressive — not in personality, never! — but in mere presence, and the weight of her memories upon him had doubled the pain. She had needed an out, and Eiko had provided one.

Besides, she was fond of the little girl, and the others had been invited along too, just for the want

of a half-reunion. Garnet could not stay for long, but while she was there they all rallied around her; her grief was deep and rose from every pore of her body. Steiner and Beatrix had a perpetually aggrieved look when they were near her, as if ashamed that they could not allay her sadness. She did not stay for long, pleading matters of the state, before finally retreating back into lonely Alexandria Castle.

Freya spent most of her days talking idle small-talk to Eiko and Vivi, or training in the warm training halls that Lindblum provided for its soldiers. At times she felt guilty for staying in the city when the settlement might have needed her, but something drew her inexplicably away, and she could not ignore it. In contrast to her days, at night, she could not sleep. She consigned herself to tossing and turning, or sat on the roof of the castle in the bitter wind, staring down at the lit jewel-like city with ribbons of woodsmoke arising from it. The noises of the loud chuggings of steam engines would sound long into the night, so she would sit with her chin on her gloved hands and meditate.

Tonight was one of those nights. Freya cuddled as warmly as she possibly could next to a stone wall, her breath smoking in the still night air, eyes half-closed as she surveyed the city. She had only meant

to be there five minutes, as she was barely clad in her sleeping gear and a thick bedrobe; somehow she fell into a half-asleep state and sat there for what seemed like hours, the tips of her long ears half-frozen as she breathed in the clear-cut sparkling night above the grimy city.

“Nice nightgown.”

A rough voice startled her from her slumber and she looked around blearily, eyes opening wide as she saw the man before her. Amarant Coral was standing on the snow-covered roof, looking like a crimson blotch on the bleary landscape; his only concession to the fact that it was utterly bloody *freezing* was a scarf.

“Amarant!” She was genuinely pleased, rocking to the balls of her feet instantly, tail twitching as it brought itself out of pins and needles. “What are you doing here?”

“Brat invited me. Arrived just a little while ago. Everybody asleep and your room was abandoned, so I just came up here.” He cocked his head. “What’re you doing on the roof? Hibernating?”

Freya fastidiously brushed her front free of coal smuts and powder snow. “Oh, yes. Very funny. I just

came up here to enjoy the ambience — and freeze my tail off.”

“In your nightgown?”

“I was in bed at the time. And don’t talk to me about underthings — you’re wearing a vest, your trousers, and precious little else. You should be dead by now.”

“I’m a monk. We’re supposed to endure hardships like this without a murmur of complaint.”

“So you don’t actually feel cold?”

“Of course I goddamn do. It’s colder than a fuckin’ witches’ tit. I just don’t *complain* about it, that’s all.”

She laughed, and looked so utterly pleased to see him that the corner of his mouth couldn’t help lifting to meet her smile. “Ah, I haven’t laughed in ages. It feels good. Would you like to come back to my room and have something hot to drink? Or have you got your own?”

“I’m staying in an inn. No way the brat managed to make me stay in this personal hellhole. And what the hell, why not?”

They made their way back to the stairs that led them back into the castle, Freya finally trembling like an unwilling leaf from the cold. She expected him to laugh; instead, Amarant rolled his eyes and divested himself of his scarf as they travelled down the cold stone passage, wrapping it around her neck as she half-fought his hands.

“I don’t need to be coddled,” she snapped good-naturedly, finally winning the short-lived battle and offering the long mess of red wool back to him. “Take it back, you idiot.”

“... look, it’s my good deed for the da... year. Just take it, all right? Let me be chivalrous for the only time in my life, rat.”

“What brought this on? Did our quest with Zidane melt your heart so much that you’ve turned humanitarian and have decided you want to show goodwill and love to everybody?”

“No. You just look goddamn pathetic.”

It warmed her heart. At least in this world where Zidane was dead, Fratley was distant, and Burmecia unassailable, some things remained constant; Amarant would remain Amarant until his dying day.

The fire was just smouldering coals when they arrived at her room, but with some swearing, kindling and patience, she had it blazing again and a full kettle positioned over the crackling logs. She always had that around, at least; water and something to heat it with were renowned for being the only things that could keep a Burmecian constantly happy. “Coffee?” she asked as he shut the door behind him, drawing up chairs.

“Yeah, whatever,” Amarant grunted. “I still can’t understand how you can drink boiled leaf piss.”

“Quite easily, you philistine.” They were falling back into their old theme of banter and camaraderie, and for this she was bone-deep grateful. Conversation had seemed almost stilted with the others — Garnet too far gone to even be close to tears, Vivi and Eiko growing every day, Steiner and Beatrix caught up with their own affairs. Freya deftly strained the grounds and removed her gloves so that she could feel the slow creeping warmth of the liquid in the mug. “Milk?”

“No.” He took his mug from the little table the kettle was resting on and pulled a flask out of a pocket inside his vest, unscrewing the top and

pouring a measure of the liquid in before replacing the flask back in his pocket.

“Alcohol?”

“There’s only two ways of keeping warm on nights like these; someone in your bed or something in your drink.” He took a long slow swig of his poisonous mixture, and the tiny history-buried drunkard in her applauded his good taste. “You obviously haven’t got whatsisface around, rat, so want some of the other?”

“His name’s Fratley, and why not?” Freya sighed. “Not that I’d be getting any of the former even if he *was* here,” she muttered in afterthought, holding out her mug.

“Trouble in paradise?” Amarant asked with his trademark sardonic smirk, liberally applying the dubious liquid into her coffee. “Can’t keep him in the right bed?”

“Bugger off,” she requested politely, then sobered. “No — it’s not like that, Amarant.”

“You two were pretty close the last time I looked. I thought you’d be having a litter of kids already.” The huge redheaded man sipped critically, then took out the flask again until Freya was pretty sure that

the ratio of coffee to alcohol was low. (The coffee was pretty bloody bad; she didn't blame him.)

"Hah." Her own was suddenly much easier to drink, the liquid giving spark to some slow comfortable flame in her belly, all too damn familiar. "What an utter farce."

"Take it from me that I do not give a *shit* and you know it, but I'll bite. What *is* wrong?"

Freya could have bitten the entire conversation back with a lie, but with all the lying to herself over the years, she could not bring herself to speak the bland untruth; not to him, not to Amarant, because suddenly she knew that he would look in the fib's face and call it bullshit. Hell, she would gladly call it bullshit. "I don't even know the man any more. He has Fratley's face, but inside, he's someone completely different. Someone I don't know. Someone I don't think I even *like*. He loves me because he thinks that's the right thing to do, but he can't manage, and what comes out is this horrible *forced* thing that I just want to strangle and strangle and strangle until it stops." She took a breath; and she found that she was past anger, and all she did was shake her head wistfully. "I suppose I was in love with the memory more than the man."

“Hasn’t his memory come back at all? Can’t you, I dunno, hit him on the head a little?”

“Not one bit. I think we’re slightly beyond your normal mental accident here.” Freya sipped more forcefully, as if mistreating the cup would mistreat her errant lover. “And even if he did suddenly remember, I think I would slap him for having the ego to leave to train just in case he ever got to fight Beatrix. He was always panting to hone his skills — above the thought of everything and everyone else. Bastard. Imagine! The *ego* of it! Living one’s whole life just to best another!”

They were silent for a moment, with him giving her the privacy to nonchalantly wipe her eyes.

“What about you?” Freya eventually said with brittle brightness. She hadn’t thought she had that much anger in her. She supposed she ought to feel like a traitor; she didn’t. “I’ve told you the details of my bloody ragged love life. Surely you can rustle up something. Lie if you have to.”

“Great. So we get to chatter like little girls.” He drained his mug and put it down, holding his hands a little way from the fire. “Rat, I’m not gonna win any prizes for being easy on the eyes, and I don’t talk

quick like monkey-boy did, either. I *have* no love life. I *want* no love life. Who d'you think I am?"

"What about..." She tried to rack her brains to think of anyone who he could possibly think of to partner him, up to and including female beasts of burden. "— Lani?"

"*Lani?*" Amarant looked aghast. "Lani is the freakin' Treno chocobo. Ask a room if they'd rode her, every man would put his fuckin' hand up. I'd only try her if I wanted to catch some sort of flesh-eating genital disease."

"What a charming relationship you two have."

"Yeah. She just hangs around me and complains."

"Where is she, by the way?"

"Hanging out in Treno, getting warm. Safe bet that she isn't using alcohol to do it." He noticed Freya blushing as she sipped her drink, and pounced on it immediately with cruel and satisfying delight. "Why, Crescent, am I possibly dirtying your maidenly virtue?"

"What maidenly virtue? I'm not a maiden and I'm damn not virtuous." The dragoon finished her coffee and set the mug down next to his, sharper

than she'd like and wishing furiously that she wasn't going red.

"You're *angry* when you're drunk."

"Coral, I am a grown woman, and it would take a lot more than that to get me anything close to drunk. I have quite a high drinking level, and that didn't even brush it. I'm not even tipsy. I'm barely *relaxed*. The entire concept is hugely and utterly laughable. I am *not drunk*."

"Oh." The hulking blueskinned man pondered that for a moment; with all the graciousness Amarant possessed, he handed the flask back to her. "Want to try?"

She hesitated for a moment. Freya was not the drunkard she had once was; she had sworn off it, it had killed her, it had been her cheap addiction and no balm for her troubled and weary heart. Sodding that for a game of soldiers, it was *really* good if she wanted to forget something short term. What was in Amarant's flask made her eyes water and paint peel; it wouldn't take much to get so bloody pissed that she'd forget anything and everything up to parents and training and Zidane Tribal's death. Besides, her heart told her, aching and low, anything was better than feeling this hateful way. Anything. Better

getting drunk than keenly and soberly close to Amarant's pity, her own whingeing, her own damned failure at life and love and being a dragoon.

Freya took it.

"This was a *bad idea*," she told him severely later, although she was grinning as she said it, giggling like an idiot in fact and feeling more nineteen than anything else. "Your turn."

The flask was attempted to be snatched out her hands; she dodged, clumsy, both of their hands mashing together in a fumbling battle before he finally triumphed and she got the giggles even worse. "You're slurring, Crescent. You can't handle your piss."

"I am not. You're just an oaf who's trying to get me drunk."

"Trying? You're *already* drunk."

"Am not."

"Am too."

"Am not."

“Am not.”

“Am t — that’s *childish*, Amarant.”

They were both laughing anyway, fit to bust. His shoulders shook as he took a long swig of the rotgut and grudgingly handed it back. “Woman, you should thank me. You’re so on edge you walk like you have a stick up your ass most of the time. I had to relax you *somehow*. Y’know, other than hitting you real hard on the head or some shit like that.”

“Gentlemen don’t use alcohol as a relaxation method,” she huffed, but drank again anyway. They were already on the second flask; how much alcohol Amarant secreted about his person was really quite amazing. “Or hitting me on the head. You *wish* —”

“Wanna rematch? I can give you a rematch, right here —”

“Eff *off* — anyway, Coral, I was saying, there’s *lots* of other things. Like... umm... backrubs.”

“If you pushed me up against a wall and threatened to kill me unless I gave a backrub, I still wouldn’t know how to give one,” he proclaimed flatly, giving her the last mouthful before tucking it back in his vest. “Still wouldn’t *want* to give one.”

“You’re trying to cover up the fact that you can’t *wait* to get your hands on my skin.”

“Yeah, *right* —”

“No, really, you want down my knickers, what was I saying —” That thought had the sober part of her brain shouting uselessly at her to change the subject before she meandered down a really dangerous avenue of Sidetrack Lane again. Freya couldn’t quite comprehend why. She was more than a little pissed. “No, honestly, they’re *good*, wrench a muscle and you need it massaged, Garnet used to give them b — b-something — *beautifully*.”

“Hell we talking about in the first place?”

“Do shut up and do what I tell you.”

Amarant began to look a bit like a small animal in the eye of a crossbow as the Burmecian pulled off her robe; out of the desperately androgynous dragoon coat and thick bedrobe, she had a long slim body with milky shoulders and pale hair every which way. She had long slim arms and legs that went on forever and — *damn it, man* — she was only dressed in a shift, but instead of some part of his mind’s hopeful and completely bemusing drunken concoctions about her taking that off too

she contented herself with plopping in front of his chair close to the fire.

“You’ve got big hands, just use your fingers rather than your palms. Ll’get the hang of it. Prob’ly. I’ll break your toe if you hurt me,” she reassured him kindly, taking his scarf off her neck to wrap around her thin hands. “*You* know where my muscles are. Better’n listening to your bountyhunting stories.”

“I can’t believe I got fuckin’ roped into this,” he complained, not even responding to her sally about the relative entertainment of his bountyhunting stories, but sighed and brushed her hair off her neck. For a moment Amarant just looked clumsily at his large hands and the delicate curve of her shoulder to nape, the soft short transparent fuzz that made up her fur, the complete crazy drunken insanity and how’d they *get* here and why wasn’t this seeming like more of a bad idea than it *was* — but then he tenuously pressed his fingertips down and carefully searched out bunched-up muscles. They were easier to find than he’d thought.

“See? S’nice,” she sighed drowsily, leaning back into him a little as, emboldened by her action, he pressed down harder. He could always break her

neck if he got even more embarrassed. “Even *you* can handle it, you big lug.”

Freya pulled the back of her shift down a little. He could see her shoulderblades. She had compellingly nice ones.

“This is the stupidest fuckin’ thing I’ve ever done. I feel stupid doin’ this. Feel stupider doin’ this with, with *you*.” He discovered a particularly stubborn knot in her neck and applied his fingers to it, finding the slow erasure of bunched-up muscles perversely satisfying — and if he concentrated, it deafened his mind about the fact that Crescent was unmistakably woman. Shit, he was *toasted*, and they both laughed as his hands fumbled for purchase. Anything was funny, this wasted, and she could really hold her liquor for a lightweight.

“Go lower,” she demanded, and her demanding was comfortable and real and all right, he could do that. Freya was pressing into the calloused pads of his large hands and every so often Amarant wrung from her a sort of kittenish coo. A sigh followed it, long and resigned and sweet. “Yes. That’s *nice*. Gods, Coral, I’m really terribly drunk, but you’re my friend and I’m glad and thank you for everything.”

“You are off your fuckin’ face.” They both started laughing again, until they couldn’t, devolving into sniggers as he touched her. “You’re gonna regret this in the morning.”

“But I *mean* it, I know, I do. Everything. Even the way you spit —”

“A man’s *gotta* spit —”

“— and everything, the bitching, and the ‘Do I have to go with *her*?’ —”

“I’ll throw you out the window, rat. I *will*.” Despite being feeling ridiculously pleased. She laughed again — imagine, Freya Crescent with the giggles — until they stopped, and she relaxed almost boneless against his hands, and for a moment he thought she’d fallen asleep.

Amarant’s hands hesitated against her, slightly fuzzy, and he thought that she should get to bed; she should be dumped in bed and he could go and find the nearest waterbutt or pack snow down his pants and hopefully forget the entire thing in the morning, just like the dumbass she called a boyfriend. He hauled her to her feet, hands tucked underneath her arms, and she woke with a start.

Which was all wrong. Her green eyes were shadowed, heavy-lidded, sweet and soft and sleepy, the same strange edge of piercing on him as she registered who was holding her up underneath her arms. All he could think of was her; not her face closer to his, not the prick of pain as her hand locked within his tangled hair and pulled him closer, not the exquisitely clumsy kiss that they were suddenly both desperate to have. She was long and lean against him, too-delicate, totally alien; they were attempting to have something their bodies weren't built to share. His hands on her; his mouth suddenly at her neck, the rocking of the world's scenery that meant they had somehow managed to fall back on the bed — they could have fallen into the fire for all she cared; his hands were very slowly pushing up her shift —

They stilled at that, the last and most obscene taboo, her arching and his hackles half-rising in growl that was all want. Freya closed her eyes very hard.

“I want this,” she said. “I want to drunkenly shag you, right now. God, I don't know if it would even work, *look* at us. I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone for a long time.”

“Good,” said Amarant, and he pushed her shift up her ribs until her tail caught his wrist.

“I want it,” she repeated, and it was practically with gritted teeth. “I want *you*. So that’s why we *can’t*, Coral.”

Totally defeated, they looked at each other; he dropped the fabric, and he rolled to his hip, and let out an explosive sigh. “I will *never* fuckin’ understand fuckin’ **women**.”

“Because,” she said; and she was still drunk, she could feel it, desperately trying to illustrate with her hands and body and whole *self*. “I want him to be **dead** so I can have this. I can’t do that. I can’t. I’m a Dragoon, I’m Burmecian, I’m *me*. I can’t do that. I won’t. I can’t — swallow poison, to kiss you — I’d kill you — I’d kill *me*, and you’re the only person I have left in the whole damn world —”

“Freya,” he said, and his voice lost itself in deep bass rumble, “rat, *let go*.”

She lay on her back and stared at the ceiling, feeling lost and adrift, suspended; she felt him, rather than heard or saw, shucking off his clothes to his trousers. Which wasn’t much clothing, anyway. He didn’t wear much. It was a third bindings and a

fifth vest and and somewhere that stupid scarf — and the bed sank underneath his weight, and she could feel the heat of him beside her, and his fingertips pressed to her eyelids.

“Crescent,” he said, again, “let go.”

Of Fratley? Of him? Of Burmecia, of being a dragoon, of the war, of the winter, of death and guilt and responsibility, of every wasteland, of being sloshed, of her heartbeat? Of everything, every only, every all —

She tried to do all of it; in her shame, wept a little; and then she fell asleep. He took his fingers away, and after a few moments, pulled the blankets up over them both. She was long and lean against him, not something made to be cuddled, but for some damn silly reason he flung one arm over her anyway. All she had in the world. All *he* had in the world, and it was pretty much in this bed.

Fuck.

“I should smother you with a goddamn pillow,” Amarant said, mostly to himself.

(Outside, it began to thaw.)

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